

THE DIRECTOR OF  
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

National Intelligence Council

13 November 1985

NOTE FOR THE DIRECTOR

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer  
Vice Chairman, NIC

You should be aware of this paper;  
no doubt it's bouncing around Washington.

Herbert E. Meyer

Attachment:  
"The Yurchenko Defection"



Directors:  
Robert Moss  
Arnaud de Borchgrave  
John Rees

**Mid-Atlantic Research Associates, Inc.**

## **THE YURCHENKO DEFECTION**

**November 7, 1985**

Washington's Monday night "by-invitation-only" press conference of November 4th at the Soviet Embassy during which Vitaly Yurchenko, a 50-year-old veteran KGB officer, announced his "escape" from "CIA kidnappers" and his intent to return immediately to the Soviet Union, seems to have been the climax of what could have been a damaging KGB operation against the United States intelligence agencies. It is evident that Yurchenko's main value to the Soviets at this critical, highly-sensitive pre-summit stage is in the areas of propaganda and disinformation, and rebuilding the KGB's morale damaged by the detection of many of their key NATO penetration agents and by the defection in London of Oleg Gordievsky. As **EARLY WARNING**, the newsletter published by Mid-Atlantic Research Associates, said in October, "some analysts believe that in order to raise bruised morale among foreign operatives, the KGB may now seek to stage another dramatic defection to the East." Certainly Yurchenko's return to Moscow will serve such a purpose, yet the known facts in the case also raise questions of what other damage may have been done.

Careful examination of the events surrounding Yurchenko's defection and redefection and related activities of the KGB are central to determining what it has accomplished for the Soviets, whether it was a KGB operation from the start or whether it was a defection-gone-sour.

The present propaganda factor is quite obvious. For example, in an effort to damage CIA Director William Casey's standing, Yurchenko went out of his way during the press conference, where he appeared to relish being in the limelight, to interject sarcastic jabs at the CIA chief about verifying his accuracy of Yurchenko's statements before he went on to claim to have been taken to the CIA headquarters to have dinner and a general discussion "of big policy issues regarding the summit" with Casey.

Yurchenko touched upon a considerable number of Soviet "disinformation" themes, among them the United States as violator of human rights, the U.S. as perpetrator of state-sponsored terrorism, the CIA as a "criminal enterprise," the CIA secretly drugging people, the CIA in Italy, the papal assassination conspiracy trial of

P.O. Box 1523, Washington, D.C. 20013  
1-800-638-2086; in Maryland: 301-366-2531

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Bulgarians and Turks in Rome as a CIA operation, and the Oleg Bitov redefection from London that took place last year and which has a number of similarities with his own redefection. In response to questions from Soviet journalists, Yurchenko answered in Russian, and in a manner somewhat more propagandistic than his answers in English for American reporters. Taking into consideration the rarity with which the Soviet Embassy calls press conferences, the extreme rarity with which the Soviets give redefectors access to Western journalists, and the unprecedented step of holding a press conference for a redefector who had not yet left the country whose intelligence service allegedly had kidnapped, drugged and imprisoned him, there can be no doubt that the Soviets showed a high degree of trust in Yurchenko, and that they were using the situation for a maximum impact domestically and in the West with an eye on the Summit.

At the start, it must be pointed out that the public accounts of Yurchenko's defection and subsequent treatment are at variance with the tried and established procedures well-known to intelligence officers. According to press reports, Yurchenko was the fifth highest official in the KGB hierarchy, but actually he was far lower in rank - by a factor of five or more. News that the Soviet Embassy in Rome had reported Yurchenko missing on August 2nd to the Italian authorities was in the press within the week. On August 9th, the Milan Corriere Della Sera reported that Yurchenko had arrived in Rome on July 24th on an unknown assignment, and had not been formally accredited. On September 1, that paper stated that Yurchenko defected in Rome on July 28, 1985, after slipping away from his colleagues to tour the Vatican Museum. This account said he had been on a special security mission related to a problem at the Embassy or to the peculiar incident that occurred in Spain in April involving Vladimir Alexandrov, purported to have been the Soviet Union's chief scientific "nuclear winter expert."

The U.S. media involvement in the Yurchenko defection was nil except for two articles by Washington-based syndicated columnist Ralph de Toledano, once a close friend of the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, which evoked little interest until September 25th when a column by de Toledano was made a front-page story by The Washington Times. The de Toledano column said that Yurchenko was the fifth highest official in the KGB, that he defected on July 24th, that the KGB had made "almost hysterical" inquiries to the Italian Foreign Ministry which "blandly replied that he is not in its hands,... This has been a tacit admission that they know of his defection. The logical conclusion is that the CIA has him." The de Toledano article said that in his head, Yurchenko "carried not only the names of top and secondary agents but also a rich knowledge of the KGB's modus operandi in Western Europe, the United States and Latin America.

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The entire Soviet espionage apparatus is therefore in deep jeopardy and must be rebuilt." The story was picked up by the national media on September 27th.

President Reagan, however, contradicted the reports that Yurchenko's information was of the highest value, saying on November 6th that it "was not anything new or sensational. It was pretty much information already known to the CIA."

Examination of past Soviet defections shows that Soviet officials, especially senior intelligence officers, infrequently risk spontaneously defecting in a public place to face an entirely uncertain future and unknown reception. Defectors-to-be usually establish contact with a Western intelligence service first. There is no reason to think that Yurchenko would do differently; and this raises questions as to when and how he made contact with the CIA.

Another question is raised by the fact that during the five-year period (1975-1980) when Yurchenko and his wife, Zhaneta, lived in Washington, he gave no known indications of having been a potential defector. Furthermore, while under diplomatic cover as an Embassy first secretary, Yurchenko was the chief security officer (a position he acknowledged during the press conference) and the control officer - a post that is given only to a Communist Party "stalwart" of unquestioned loyalty and reliability. His job was to monitor the Soviet community in Washington - including the families - a position often regarded as more important than the rezident, the chief KGB administrative officer. One aspect of embassy security work calls for maintaining official liaison with host country security and police forces regarding such matters as protests, demonstrations, threats and terrorism. Not only did Yurchenko not defect while in the U.S., but there has been no indication that he worked for the United States at any time prior to his defection.

As control officer and a senior counterintelligence officer, Yurchenko would have been informed of American intelligence initiatives against Soviet personnel, some of the activities of the Bloc services in the U.S., and of KGB gossip about successes and failures. He also would have had supervisory responsibilities to review some KGB operations in order to ensure that American intelligence had not been successful in penetrating Soviet operations, and that American spies recruited by the KGB were not under the control of U.S. agencies. Therefore Yurchenko could be expected to have been well versed in CIA and FBI operations, and to have known the identities of some of the KGB's American sources. Yet, according to public information, only two or three American KGB sources were exposed. One is Edward Lee Howard, 34, now a fugitive. But Howard is described as a small-time ex-CIA agent who was

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pressured into resigning several years ago, before he made contact with the Soviets. Also there is no evidence yet available that Howard's "volunteering" to the Soviets ever was accepted. It is not improbable that the identification of Howard was done to establish Yurchenko's bona fides, and had less intrinsic importance than at first realized. Yet Howard has been blamed for helping the KGB identify and arrest a Soviet scientific researcher in a Moscow aeronautical institute, A.G. Tolkachev, who disappeared on June 14th after having supplied what has been termed high quality information on Soviet military aircraft technology for several years. The Soviets announced that Tolkachev had been caught in the act of passing information to Paul Stombaugh, a U.S. Embassy diplomat, who was expelled. Howard reportedly had been trained to become Tolkachev's case officer, although he was fired from the CIA before he ever went to Moscow.

Yurchenko would have been aware of the treatment awaiting returning defectors, and would have known better than to believe the promises of Soviet officials, even if he met them after defecting voluntarily. But there is nothing on the record to indicate that during the three months that he apparently was cooperating with the CIA/FBI debriefers, he was contacted by the Soviets or placed under duress by them to return. Rather, available information indicates that on one or two occasions he was alone with the opportunity and means available to contact them. And on Saturday evening, November 2nd, after dining with his sole American companion (contrary to established practice) in Georgetown's Au Pied de Cochon restaurant, he slipped away and returned to the Soviet compound. Therefore, it is a viable supposition that the Yurchenko defection was a pre-planned Soviet intelligence operation, and that when Vitaly Yurchenko returned to the Embassy, he was confident that he faced not punishment, but rewards for a job well done. The trust of him exhibited by the Soviets in the press conference, and the confident attitude exhibited by Yurchenko supports that view.

But there are other theories surrounding his redefection. According to some public reports, Yurchenko was allowed to place one or more telephone calls to his family in Moscow, and that he was touched by the pleas of his 16-year-old son to return. Another theory is that he was angered by the treatment he was accorded by his American debriefers, a joint CIA and FBI group, who, as he complained at the press conference, spoke no Russian, did not provide him with a translator, and required him to speak only in English.

Other reports say that Yurchenko was suffering severely from the depression that often strikes defectors; but that his depression was exacerbated when his alleged former mistress, identified by ABC

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television as Svetlana Detkova, the wife of an official of Omnitrade, a Soviet trading company, currently stationed in Totonto, Canada, refused to defect after the Americans arranged a secret, face-to-face meeting there between the two in October. After Yurchenko boarded a Soviet airliner to return to Moscow on November 6th, ABC's evening news carried a report from Toronto that Detkova had been killed the previous evening in a fall from the 27th floor of an apartment building. If indeed she was Yurchenko's former mistress (the Canadian Foreign Ministry said it had "no reason to believe there is any relation" between her death and Yurchenko), the circumstances of her death undoubtedly will provide grist for Soviet propaganda mills.

Was Yurchenko the most senior KGB officer to have defected, or was he the most senior intelligence officer to have been used as a KGB plant? If the latter is the case, it would raise the logical question of why a senior intelligence official was used, rather than a younger man specially trained for such a mission? One answer may lie in England, where the chief KGB officer, the rezident, Oleg Gordievsky, defected in May. Gordievsky, who served previously in Denmark was said by Danish officials to have been working for the West for more than a decade.

The Gordievsky defection indeed appears to have been a most serious blow against Soviet intelligence operations, and it would necessitate a major "damage control" operation. But to conduct damage control, the KGB first would have to determine just what information Gordievsky had disclosed, how it was being evaluated and used, and, if possible, to discover whether other Western "moles" were active inside the KGB and obtain information leading to their identification. One way to achieve this would be to launch a false defector. As the Soviets know, information provided by one defector is used as a stimulus in the questioning of others. It would have aroused suspicions to send a second defector, one without credentials and with no credible "legend" to the British directly on Gordievsky's heels. But they could plant him on the Americans knowing that these countries share some intelligence information of interest to one another.

The Soviets would not have had time to indoctrinate and specially train a KGB officer for the role, to supply him with believable credentials and to create a "legend" for him. But Yurchenko was at hand - a reliable individual who had been the control officer in Washington, who was familiar with U.S. intelligence and counterintelligence methods, and who had some European service which would have brought him into areas where his information would be presumed to complement or overlap that of Gordievsky. Two months intensive briefing would have been sufficient to prepare him for his launching

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into American hands as a discontented member of the KGB's upper echelons. Providing collateral for this theory is the report that some five weeks before his defection, the Soviet press carried a photograph of Yurchenko with other officials at a June 10th Moscow function. An evaluation of the "seating order" in this picture indicated to Western analysts that Yurchenko indeed was a high ranking KGB officer.

Some would challenge this theory, arguing that Yerchenko would have declined the role as a risk to his career advancement. But others argue that Yurchenko's intelligence career would not have been at risk because at the time of his "defection," it already had proceeded to the customary limit. Moscow reserves the most senior positions in the Soviet intelligence service for Party nominees from the nomenklatura - in other words, members of the Party elite who had not been posted abroad for lengthy periods, if at all, where they would be subject to outside temptations and influences.

In launching a false defector, obviously there is a risk that the agent will be detected or "break." However, following the defection of Anatoli Golitsyn in December 1961, the KGB sought to improve the compartmentalization of information disseminated inside the Soviet intelligence bureaucracy. As a result, subsequent KGB defectors of all ranks have been a little more expert but in much narrower fields. More significant is the fact that the quality of their general knowledge of KGB activities not related to their duties - their "gossip" - has fallen. So while it would have been a severe blow to the Soviets had Yurchenko "broken," KGB compartmentalization was designed to minimize the damage. Certainly, in view of the presumed impact of the Gordievsky defection, it was worth the risk. And there is the precedent of successful double agent operations in the past - the individuals known as "Fedora" and "Top Hat" among them.

This is not to suggest that the Soviets would undertake a false defection operation recklessly. Intelligence operations, especially Soviet intelligence operations, are relatively cautious and usually grounded on precedent. Generally they are not launched unless the Soviets believe they have sufficient knowledge of the opposing agency's procedures to be able to predict its moves with accuracy.

What then could have prompted the Soviets to launch Yurchenko, and what might have been their objectives? Our sources indicate that within the past several years, the Soviets came to realize that the Western intelligence agencies had developed an disturbing degree of knowledge about KGB operations, especially those in Europe. Such knowledge had to have come from one or more "turned" KGB officers. For example, the recent publication in Germany and France of detailed data on Soviet clandestine high technology acquisition operations

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implied that the West had such a redundancy of sources, that it could afford to risk some of them by publishing in the open press the material their agents provided. That would have made it imperative for the KGB's counterintelligence directorate to expose the Western agents in their midst. At the same time, the KGB would need to effectively destroy the credibility of the information they were providing. Both these factors are likely to have been part of Yurchenko's mission, if he was a plant.

Pursuing the false defector theme another step, KGB officers know that every defection is quickly followed by a counterintelligence reexamination of every component of that service connected even remotely with the defector. The defection of a senior KGB officer while on a visit in Western Europe would precipitate an even more severe housecleaning. If the Soviets induced a false defection, it could also benefit the counterintelligence service by serving as a provocation under controlled conditions, namely with counterintelligence personnel already deployed in the field. By this means, the KGB would be able to observe the initial reactions of their rezidentura personnel to the impending purge.

This is not to imply that controlled "launchings" of double agents cannot have adverse side effects. The announcement of the Gordievsky defection was followed by the hasty flight to East Berlin of Hans Joachim Tiedge, a top West German counterintelligence official who had secretly worked for the East. Tiedge's flight to East Berlin created a domino effect in which some of the key agents he had shielded from detection defected in his wake.

A more remote possibility proposes that if Yurchenko had been a plant from the start, there might have been a defensive aspect to the operation by protecting Soviet sources or agents in the U.S. through denial. Likewise, there could have been an offensive aspect in determining which Americans were under suspicion as a Soviet contact and why.

Yurchenko is said to have helped his case officers in developing a psychological profile of the current generation of senior KGB officers. Some critics strongly insist that the profiles exhibit "mirror-imaging" defects - that is, they depict Soviet intelligence professionals in terms appropriate to or acceptable to Western agencies. For example, in recent months profiles of the KGB's "new generation" began emerging depicting them as Soviet "yuppies" - individuals not ideologically motivated, urbane, educated, professional technocrats who could really savor the good life in the West and were markedly susceptible to cooperating with the West, and to defecting.



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Other analysts of the new generation in the Soviet Union dispute that and say that the reality is quite different. The new generation of KGB officers -in common with their fellows in the military, science and technology, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union - grew into the benefits and power that the nomenklatura - the upper-level bureaucracy - has to offer. On the whole, they are professionals in pursuit of power which they can get only through the nomenklatura. The prime goal of the nomenklaturists is self-preservation and enhancement of their power. The elite Soviet establishment protects itself -and its loyal members - through a very cautious process of selection and promotion that ensures that only the most reliable and orthodox aspirants will reach the upper echelons of power. In the wake of the damaging defections of two nomenklaturists - Arkady Shevchenko and Mikhail Voslensky - there have been efforts to tighten the selection process. This means that the rising stars of the KGB may not be ardent ideologues, but they are committed to preservation of the power of the establishment that created them.

If Vitaly Yurchenko was fulfilling a planned KGB role during the period of his defection, the available information indicates that he was an excellent actor. He was considered a friendly and cooperative defector - a "good guy" -by his CIA and FBI case officers, and in no way was he under "house arrest." He won the confidence of those conducting his debriefing. He was housed in a Washington suburb and taken on outings in areas familiar to him from his five year residence in the capital. On the night of his redefection, he and his lone American companion, a CIA officer, were dining in a 24-hour Georgetown restaurant, Au Pied de Cochon, which is something of a hangout for European immigrants in the city. Yurchenko is said to have selected this restaurant for dinner. It is located only a few blocks from the Soviet Embassy's new compound. Before he walked away, he is said to have asked his CIA companion, "What would you do if I got up and walked out. Would you shoot me?" When told no, Yurchenko said he was going out and would be back in 15 or 20 minutes. He walked out saying, "If I'm not, it's not your fault."

But there are many questions remaining. If Yurchenko was a plant, why did he suddenly bolt for the Embassy? Did he slip and reveal himself inadvertently to his debriefers? Did they discover him? Did his debriefers reveal some information to him so critical to the Soviet leadership that he had to abort everything to deliver it when his debriefing would have been expected to continue for at least a year? Other questions center around the strange treatment of a KGB defector - his telephone calls to his son, the apparent encouragement of his romance with Mrs. Detkova, his meeting with Director Casey, his being housed in Washington, his visits to public

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restaurants in the Washington area, the insistence of senior CIA officials that he was a bona fide defector, after only a 12-week period of questioning - cannot be ignored.

It also is relevant to ask about the highly unusual publicity given to Yurshenko's defection, including a story that appeared in Newsweek's November 4th edition stating that Yurchenko had met personally with the CIA Director, to the reporting of his debriefings to the Senate Intelligence Committee and subsequent media publicity given to selected disclosures, and the failure of the CIA to inform the FBI immediately of his disappearance and probable redefection.

Two things are certain: satisfactory answers to the Yurchenko riddle will be long in coming; and the Soviet Union has developed a weapon for use at the Summit meetings that may rival the Gary Powers ploy of the Eisenhower-Khrushchev debacle.

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